

The First Vatican Council

Sensing the growing intellectual freedom of Catholics everywhere, the Ultramontanists felt that only by an absolute dictatorship over the thoughts and conscience of the faithful could Rome regain its former power over the entire occidental world -- a power weakened by the great Protestant Reformation. The establishment of such a dictatorship they sought, and obtained, through the agency of the first Vatican Council of 1870.

Up to the time of this Council the personal infallibility of the Pope was considered nothing more than a "pious opinion" held by a faction within the Church. The larger part of the Catholic Church so little believed in it, that when Protestants reproached them with this superstition, Roman theologians regarded it as a calumny. The Vatican Council was a bold step in an attempt to make what had formerly been regarded as a 'Protestant invention' into the keystone of the Catholic Faith.

Pius IX, an aging pope without much theological culture, who had been inspired by the Jesuits into sensing his own personal infallibility, accordingly, to secure the official recognition of the Church by a so-called General Council in this matter, summoned the Vatican Council to open on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8th December 1870). On that very day, fifteen years earlier, Pius IX had himself proclaimed this new dogma, and a fervid prelate, who had just returned from a visit to Lourdes, assured him: "The Pope has said to Mary, 'You are immaculate.' And now Mary answers the Pope, "And you are infallible."

In the Vatican Council the representatives of the great majority of Roman Catholics, the German, French, Austrian, English, Czech, Irish and American bishops, oddly enough formed the minority. The great majority was to be found in Italian Bishops representing numerous diminutive dioceses and in titular Bishops without dioceses, whose expenses, Cardinal Schwarzenburg said, "the Pope was obliged to pay entire, even to their very socks, so that they voted blindly at his bidding. The minority had little opportunity of voicing their opposition to the creation of the new dogma. An order of business described by a Roman Catholic Archbishop who was present at the Council as "a cursed congeries of pitfalls," precluded all free discussion.

If the minority could not be heard in Council and wished to have a memoir of their opposition printed, the printing houses of Rome were forbidden to serve them. Pamphlets mailed from out of the country were sequestered and never delivered. Anyone answering the Pope with an appeal to Christian Tradition was silenced with "I am tradition."

In a last minute appeal to the Pope, when several bishops were allowed an audience, the proud bishop of Mainz, Baron von Kotteler, fell on his knees weeping to implore the Pope not to formulate the fatal dogma of his own infallibility. Finally, when the dogma was met with its first vote, eighty-eight voted against it, ninety-one bishops refrained from voting, and sixty-two voted yea only conditionally. The opposition departed from Rome before a second vote was taken rather than be called upon either to support the hated dogma or personally offend the Pope by voting negatively.

With all opposition dispersed the ultramontanists sealed their triumph in the final vote with still two negative voices on July 18th, 1870. On that day, in the midst of one of the fiercest storms to break across the city of Rome, accompanied by thundering and lightning, while rain poured in through the broken glass of the roof near him, Pius IX rose in the darkness, and by the aid of the feeble light of a candle, read the momentous affirmation of his own infallibility. "We declare it to be an article of faith that the Roman Pope possesses infallibility in any doctrine relating to faith and morals. If anyone shall oppose this our decision, which God forbid, let him be accursed,"

The storm has been variously interpreted by friend or foe, as comparable to the solemn legislation of Mt. Sinai or as tokens of Divine displeasure and approaching desolation. But whatever constructions were

placed upon the circumstances surrounding the birth of the new dogma, the Western Church was indisputably bound to a new interpretation of its Catholicity. Tradition and Scripture were no longer necessary. Instead, every Christian under pain of being accursed was hereafter to know that on any matter concerning his Faith, he would have to be content with the answer "the Pope has spoken, the cause is ended."